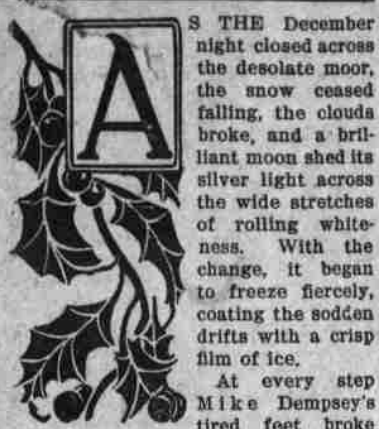


## Santa Mike— A Christmas Convict Story

By T. C. BRIDGES



AS THE December night closed across the desolate moor, the snow ceased falling, the clouds broke, and a brilliant moon shed its silver light across the wide stretches of rolling whiteness. With the change, it began to freeze fiercely, coating the sodden drifts with a crisp film of ice.

At every step Mike Dempsey's tired feet broke through this coating, and sank deep into soft stuff beneath, making the traveling so terribly hard that, in spite of the bitter cold, perspiration stood in beads on his thin, brown face.

He was breathing hard, and evidently desperately weary, yet he never stopped for a moment, though now and then, as he plowed his way onwards, he would turn his head and cast an apprehensive glance back over his shoulder.

Had anyone been near enough to watch him, they would easily have understood his haste. The drab livery plentifully bespattered with broad arrows marked him as one of the state's unwilling guests. As a matter of fact, Mike Dempsey had been for the last three years a prison inmate, and it was with the intention of escaping another seven years of unappreciated hospitality that he had, a few hours previously, "done a bunk" under cover of the sudden snowstorm.

"I've puzzled them screws, that's what sure," he muttered to himself, and in spite of his fatigue a slight chuckle escaped his thin lips. "But faith, I've puzzled meself, too, and I don't know where I am no more than Adam."

"If I could only get a landmark of some sort!" he went on. "Faust! I did find my road to the railway, I'd win clear. Mike Dempsey wasn't a savvy seven years for nothing."

He crunched his slow way across a flat valley, jumped a little brook and pushed up the steep slope beyond.

A gleam of light in the next valley attracted his attention. It came from a lighted window, and there was something comforting to the lonely fugitive in the red glow cast upon the glittering snow. Without hesitation, he started downhill toward it.

Presently he was cautiously approaching a small house, which stood in a tiny garden surrounded by a low dry-stone wall. There was a gate in front, but Mike preferred to approach



It was a man lying flat on his face, from the back, and clambering gingerly over the wall crept up to the window from which the light came.

Raising himself till his head was on a level with the sill, he peered through the uncurtained window into a barely furnished living room, lighted by a great fire of glowing turf.

A couch stood in one corner, on which lay a youngish man whose bandaged head showed him to be the victim of some accident. On a chair beside him sat a sweet-faced woman, and on a bare earthen floor played two children—a curly-haired boy of about seven, and a chubby girl a year or so younger.

But what arrested Mike's attention was a little fir tree, not more than four feet high, which stood planted in an old bucket, on the table in the middle of the room.

For a moment it puzzled Mike. Then he gave a little snarl. "Begorra, if it isn't a Christmas tree! Why, 'tis Christmas eve, I do believe, though, faith, I'd lost track of the date in the cold stone jug on the hill. But where are the presents? The as bar as me own pocket," he went on wonderingly.

At that moment the door opened, and going forward of the woman, pulled at her dress to attract her attention.

"Mother, isn't Santa Claus coming? He's awful late. We shan't have a Kilmass tree if he doesn't come soon."

"It's the snow, dearie," explained the mother. "Such a bad storm that I expect he was late in starting. But

now it's cleared up, I daresay he'll be here soon."

Her words were cheery, but Mike caught the anxious glance she gave her husband.

"Go out and see if William's in sight yet, Alice," said the man. "He ought to have been here an hour ago. I only hope nothing has happened to the poor old fellow."

Mike dropped on hands and knees behind the angle of the wall as the door opened, and the woman stood on the threshold looking out down the empty snow-clad valley.

Somewhat the pithos of the bare little Christmas tree and the anxious family appealed to his hardened old soul, and when the door closed again he rose to his feet, and instead of following out his first intention and entering the house to demand food and clothes, climbed the wall again and made off down the valley.

"If William's coming this way, there'll be a road of sorts," he said to himself.

And sure enough there was. Though covered deep in snow, he found that there was a path down the valley, which he had little doubt would lead eventually to the main road to town.

He had gone another mile when a dark patch in the snow straight ahead attracted his attention, and he caught his breath sharply as he stopped beside it.

For it was a man lying flat on his face, and, judging by the snow which almost covered his body, he had been there in the same position for some time. Beside him lay a half-filled sack, also covered with snow.

Mike gave a sharp glance around. The moonlight horizon was still bare. He stooped and turned the man over.

"Dead!" he muttered. "Dead and cold!" as he laid his hand against the chill cheek.

For a moment he stood staring at the dead man's face, which was that of a little old man, wizened and bearded, and very much of Mike's own type and build.

Then, like a flash, it came to the convict that here at last was his chance, and a thrill shot through his weary frame.

"He'll not need them duds any more," he muttered, and, dropping on his knees in the snow, began with trembling fingers to strip the dead man of his clothes.

They were worn and old, but to Mike as precious as broadcloth, for once he was rid of his convict garb he had multiplied his chances of escape a hundredfold.

The gruesome task was soon completed, and the luckless stranger almost covered with snow. Then, reckless of the bitter frost, Mike stripped off his own slops, and in less than five minutes stood up to all outward appearances an elderly, harmless-looking laborer.

Not till he had completed the whole change of costume down to boots and hat, and had buried his broad arrows deep in a neighboring drift, did Mike bethink himself of the sack.

He snatched it up eagerly, hoping it might contain food. His last meal had been eight ounces of prison bread and a pint of cocoa, and that nearly twelve hours ago. He was desperately hungry.

The mouth of the sack was tied with a string. Mike's fingers were so numb that he could not untie the knot. But there was a knife in the pocket of his stolen suit, and he quickly cut the cord, and turned the contents of the sack out upon the snow.

A small drum, a bag of lead soldiers, a cheap doll, a box of wax tapers, and one of crackers, and a couple of packets of sweets. Not an article of the lot which had cost 25 cents, and the value of the whole not five dollars.

Mike stood and stared at them. The box of soldiers had fallen open. He stooped and picked up the little painted figures, and replaced them carefully.

"So 'twas poor old Santa Claus," he muttered. "And the children will be waiting on him. 'Twas hard luck intirely."

Again he bent down and quickly bundled everything back into the sack. He laid this by the dead body, and turning on his heel, walked rapidly away.

The last fragment of cloud had blown away over the southern hills and the moon made the snow-clad moor almost light as day. But the crust was now hard enough to bear the convict's weight, and he traveled quickly across the frozen surface, casting sharp glances to right and left as he went.

He was going down hill, now, and the farther he went the thinner grew the depth of snow, and the plainer was the path. He felt sure that he was nearing the main road to Ashampton. He could not be more than four or five miles from the town now, and with his knowledge of railway matters it would be easy enough to stow away in a truck, and lying under a tarpaulin be carried scores of miles away from the hated prison. Besides there was money in his trousers pockets. Only a little, but plenty to buy food and drink, a clay pipe, and a plug of tobacco.

Mike's mouth watered as he thought of a square meal.

He tried to keep his thoughts on the prospect of these almost forgotten luxuries, yet, somehow it was difficult. The picture seen through the cottage window kept rising before his mind, and though he did his best to thrust it aside, the effort was unavailing.

The other children were watching their bare little Christmas tree, waiting for the presents that would never come. Like all Irish people, Mike was gifted or cursed with a lively imagination, and he thought of the little ones at last giving up hope, and crying themselves to sleep in their attic under the snow-clad roof.

Long years ago Mike had a home of his own, a wife, and a baby. Wife and baby both had died, swept away in a week by an epidemic of diphtheria, and that had been the beginning of the Irish navy's downfall. But he had never forgotten them, and tonight they seemed strangely near him.

A sound between a grunt and a groan burst from his lips; he stopped and looked back.

Behind was the arctic desolation of the moor lying ridge upon ridge against the twinkling stars, and back of these hills the grim, granite prison-house. In front were valleys and fields, and the warm lights of the town, the hope of liberty.

"'Tis a fool ye are, Mike Dempsey!" he exclaimed aloud. "Git along wid ye, and don't be delaying for the screws to nab ye!"

Again he started forward, but more slowly than before, and he had not gone a hundred yards before once more he came to a dead stop.

"'Tis no use," he groaned. "I'll just run back an' lave them things at the dure. There'll be time to reach town by midnight."

The bitter wind was in his face as he turned back up the hill, but now Mike did not hesitate for a moment. Head down, he hurried onwards, and presently was again beside the corpse of Santa Claus' frozen messenger.

Without a glance at the body he snatched up the sack, flung it over his shoulder, and continued his way up the valley.

The glow from the lighted window threw its red beam across the snow as he rounded the curve and came within sight of the lonely cottage and a corresponding glow warmed Mike's heart as he thought of the pleasure of the children when they found their long-delayed Christmas gifts.

Seeing no sign of life, he slipped in at the front gate, and, stepping very quietly up the path, gained the door, dropped his sack, and giving one sharp tap, turned the bolt.

But he had not counted on the eager children, and before he could get round

the door, he was surrounded by a group of children, who were staring at him with wide eyes.

"All Right," he said sullenly, "I'll Come Quiet."

the angle of the house curly-locks came flying after him.

"William, where is Santa Claus?" piped the childish treble.

"It ain't William, sonny. Tell your mammy as William's got lost, and I brought the things instead. Now I've got to go, for I'm in a mighty hurry."

"I expect you are!" came a jeering voice, and a blue-uniformed man carrying a carbine stepped out from the dark shadow round the corner, followed instantly by a second.

Mike gave one glance around. But he was cornered. The wall cut off escape.

"All right," he said sullenly, "I'll come quiet."

"You'd better," retorted the warder, whose temper long hours in the snow had not improved.

"Mammy, the policemen have took Santa Claus," cried the little lad.

Mike glanced up. The boy's mother was standing by, her face blank with amazement.

"What does this mean?" she cried. "Is it William?"

"Not unless he's changed his name since morning, missus," replied the warder. "He was Michael Dempsey when he bunked from Moorlands just after dinner."

"But I don't understand. He's got William Coker's clothes on, and he's brought the things that William went to fetch."

The other warder—a grizzled, elderly man—shook his head.

"You've got me, missus. I don't know what his little game is no more than you."

"Most like he has murdered William," put in the younger warder sourly.

"He said William was lost, mammy," explained the boy, "so he's brought the things instead. And here they are, all safe."

"Best make a clean breast of it, Dempsey," suggested the elder warder.

"Go and find out yourself," flashed the old convict. "William's down the valley there."

"You take the chap into the house, George," said the older warder. "I'll go down and see."

Half an hour later he returned. "I've found William," he said briefly. "He's froze to death. Dempsey took his clothes, but he didn't have no hand in killing him."

"Then, in the name of sense, what did he come back here for instead of skimming out?" inquired the younger warder, in blank surprise.

"He came to bring our Kilmass presents," explained curly-locks. "He told me so."

"Well, of all the everlasting fools," gasped the junior warder.

His senior wheeled on him sharply. "A good thing if there were a few more fools of that kind in Moorlands. Ay—and outside, too!"

He turned to Mike: "Come along, Dempsey," he said in a more kindly tone. "I'll see as the governor knows how it was we come to take you. And I reckon your play-acting Santa Claus won't do you no harm in his eyes, any more than it has in mine!"

# ENTERTAINING ON CHRISTMAS

## BACK IN COLONIAL DAYS FOLKS HAD GREAT FEASTS HONORING THE OCCASION: HERE'S HOW —

THE Christmas season brings to mind the many Christmas days gone by, with their four great features—turkey, cranberry sauce, plum pudding and mince pie.

It was a good old English custom, not to be rejected by the American colonists, although modifications were necessary to suit the religion and conditions of living in the colonies, the Christ-spirit being substituted for the pagan yuletide, the famous "boar's head" was omitted, and the Christmas pie became known as mince pie. However, many old observances were kept, including the mistletoe and holly, and Christmas was a day for family gatherings, with a feast prepared by the women of the house.

It is quite possible that we would not like their flavorings today. They used a variety of spices, wines and seasonings in even their plainest dishes; but as everything was prepared in the home, either under the supervision of the mistress or by her own hands, the mixtures were wholesome.

Everything was turned to account in the season with a view to future use, so in this way preparations for the holiday were going on long before the day.

In cherry time, a supply was carefully packed in hay and kept for Christmas.

The Christmas cookies, with coriander seed in them, were baked six months before and kept in an earthenware jar in the cellar.

**Mince Meat Recipe.** The rich plum pudding and cakes were made early in the fall and put away to mellow and ripen.

The mincemeat was then made, the recipe for which was recently found in an old Philadelphia cookbook. We copy all but the spelling: "Four pounds veal, four pounds suet, two pounds raisins, one pound currants, six apples, some rose water and sack half a pound, no more of sugar, three-fourths pound cloves, mace, nutmeg and cinnamon, some candied orange peel, lemon peel, citron and blanched almonds."

They made a puff paste for their pies different from ours. One recipe called for flour, one pound butter, ten eggs and some milk or water.

Some housewives made their winter supply of mince pies before Thanksgiving and reheated them before using.

For the lemon tarts, the lemons had to be first soaked in salt water for two days. Then every day for fourteen days they were put into fresh cold water. When they were made, apples, oranges and sugar were added.

A few days before Christmas the mistress went to market, the maid carrying the basket. She would get her turkey, cranberries, celery, oysters, and a little pig for roasting whole.

The day before Christmas the real excitement began. The stuffing was made, and such stuffings! Bread crumbs, beef suet, liver, lemon peels, nutmeg, savory, pepper, salt, cream and eggs. The little pig, only four or five weeks old, was filled to its utmost capacity with mashed potatoes or apples.

Not the least to be considered were the green decorations. Ground pine for festoons and wreaths, mistletoe to hang, and holly everywhere were the necessities.

When Christmas morning came the excitement was at its highest pitch. The housewife, her daughters and her maids were up early. The brick oven was heated and the mince pies put in. The turkey was dredged with flour and put on the spit, with a small unwilling child to watch and turn it as it browned.

Another child was set to cracking nuts and polishing apples.

**Roasting the Little Pig.** The little pig was put before the fire to roast in the dripping pan, in which were three bottles of red wine for basting.

While the things were cooking a long table, the length of the room, was spread with the white linen cloth, napkin, china and silver or pewter.

In the middle of the table was the famed Christmas bowl. Here are the quaint directions for making it:

"Break nine sponge cakes and half a pound of macaroons in a deep dish; pour over one pint raisin wine, half pint sherry. Leave them to soak. Sweeten with two ounces of powdered sugar candy and pour over one pint and a half of custard. Stick with two ounces sliced almonds. Place on a stand and ornament with Christmas evergreens."

The tankard with the Christmas brew was put on the table, and all the syllabubs, jellies, pickles, lemon tarts, red apples, nuts, the cookies and the cherries fresh from the hay.

The fireplaces were now blazing, and the red berries and green leaves of the holly were shining in the light.

The mistletoe was waiting for the unwary, and the good smell of the brown turkey, savory stuffing and applesauce was everywhere.

**Don Their Best Frocks.** After the housewife and her daughters had seen to everything they hurried to put on their best flowered silks, with white whims around their necks and the most secret beautifiers on their faces.

Then the dinner being nearly cooked, they took the little browned pig, raised him gently and put two small loaves of bread under him, and added more wine; an anchovy, a bundle of sweet herbs and a half a lemon was put into the sauce, which was poured over him hot. They had him sitting on his haunches looking lifelike. Then they put

an order for a ton or half a ton of coal. This may be given by the united contributions of a class.

A novel and successful Christmas entertainment was given in an eastern Sunday school.

After prayer, Scripture responses and carols, sleigh bells were heard, announcing the coming of Santa Claus. He appeared upon the platform shaking an empty bag, and lamented he had no gifts for some needy children. "Little Beginners" hastened to their friend with packages of sugar and "sweet" little rhymes; primary children followed; then representatives from every class in the school, even the Bible union. Offerings were accompanied by specially prepared recitations, songs or dialogues, and gifts dressed to suit their gift. Children bringing cereals appeared as "Quakers"; rice suggested Chinese costume; tea, Japanese; "pure" products, the Puritan style, each. Songs were set to popular airs, making drill work easy.

Finally, Santa Claus had a valuable supply of provisions for an orphan asylum. The happy givers then received remembrances from their teachers. All found "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

## PERHAPS YOU WANT SUGGESTIONS ABOUT DISTRIBUTING THE GIFTS—HERE ARE SEVERAL—

LL gifts, carefully marked, should be consigned the day before to the one in charge, and she must purchase a quantity of clothesline and clothespins. The line should be stretched back and forth across the living room, and each gift, wrapped in tissue paper and tied with red ribbons, should be fastened to the line by a clothespin, decorated with wings of red and green paper.

In the bay window a table should be arranged on which is placed a "Jack Horner" pie, containing a Christmas souvenir for each member of the family. The ribbons attached to the packages in the pie should be carried up to a holly-decorated hoop suspended over the table, each ribbon tagged with the name of the one for whom it is intended. When the "family wash" has been taken down—each person seeking his or her own gift—they gather around the pie, and at a signal "pull out their plums."

**Hidden in Egg Shells.** When the family is all present at breakfast start to serve the meal of coffee, bread and butter, ham and soft-cooked eggs without any mention of gifts.

At each place have an eggcup or saucer, on which you put an egg, the contents having been removed previously through a small hole in the end; partly fill with sand, and let each contain a small paper with a suggestion in poetry of where or how to find their gifts.

As each person thinks he is cracking his egg he finds the puzzle inside.

Much merriment and good cheer will be the result.

Serve original content of eggshells in omelet with the ham.

Hide one person's gifts in bookcase, paper in egg to read.

If you are either wise or smart You'll find me in a hurry. Among gifted people I now dwell; So hunt, don't sit and worry.

**Frost King and Snowballs.** As this is the time for the clever woman of the family to devise some unique way of distributing Christmas gifts, she may decorate the living room with evergreens, holly and mistletoe, and then place in one corner a table covered with a white cloth, hidden from view by a screen of generous size. On this table is placed snowballs. These snowballs, made of white cotton batting and tied with white ribbon, contain each designated present, and are heaped in a pyramid, thus obtaining a mass of snowballs of varied size. The pile is scattered freely with diamond dust, in order to give it an attractive sparkle. If there is a small boy in the house he may be dressed as a Frost King, in a costume of white wadding, sprinkled with diamond dust; leaves and holly berries can be sewed here and there upon the robe. At a given signal the screen is removed, disclosing the tiny Frost King, who, with a few words of Christmas greeting, gathers the snowballs into a pretty basket, and as each ball bears a small tag he finds no difficulty in distributing the gifts to those assembled.

**A Holly Pie.** A novel way of distributing Christmas gifts on Christmas morning is to make a big pie in the center of the table of holly branches, and arrange it so the gifts can be easily drawn from under it. Each gift must be tied with a narrow red ribbon and one end lead to each place at the table. This is great fun, and of course everyone is anxious to see who gets the most ribbons, the lucky one being declared the most popular. The pie is not "opened" until end of breakfast.

**A Christmas Trail.** One member of the family should take charge of the gifts, and when the coast is clear should lay the "trail" with them in all of the available downstairs rooms. Start from a tiny Christmas tree on the living room table by fastening to it a card for each person, marked, for example, thus: "Card No. 1, father. Look for card No. 2 in umbrella stand in hall." In the stand he will find a package tagged in this manner: "Card No. 2, father. Look for card No. 3 in your hat in hall closet." The third card will be found on a gift in the spot designated, "with further instructions, which are followed on to the next, until all his presents come to light. Everyone pursues his or her trail at once, and a merry scene of confusion is the result. These cards may be prepared beforehand, and no difficulty will be experienced in, in placing the gifts, each trail is finished before starting to lay another. The last cards should direct the family to their places at the dining room table, where they will find amusing souvenirs of the occasion.

**Cobweb Method.** A rather novel and entirely inexpensive way of distributing Christmas gifts is to employ the "cobweb" method. Suspend a rope diagonally across the room, over which the strings may cross, each string to be labeled at its source with the name of the member of the family or the friend for whom it is intended. A sheet can be hung across one end of the room, hiding the gifts from view until time for winding the strings. Let all begin the quest at once, it being necessary to find the beginnings of the strings where the names are attached. This will afford considerable amusement, as the strings should be run through keyholes, under beds, over transoms and even out of doors, if possible.

Aside from the element of mystery contained in this method, there is the added value which attaches to those things which have been really earned through one's own efforts.



a red apple in his mouth, which, alas! he could never eat, and garnished him with holly.

At last the company came, the mistress preserving a calm exterior, but with an inward anxiety lest something be burned or spilled at the last moment.

When all is ready the beaming host says, "Friends, will thee join us in the Christmas feast?" And with great dignity he leads them, with the guest of honor on his arm, followed by the older people and the children.

**The Table Decorated.** The table is a picture to cheer the hungry. The large turkey is at one end and the pig at the other end of the long table, with everything they are to eat between, excepting the plum pudding.

After the silent grace, which stills the noise for a moment, the carver takes his knife, and with a deliberation born of steady nerves carves under the fire of twenty pairs of eyes.

The directions in "Gentlewoman's Housewifery" says: "Raise the leg fairly of the turkey and open the joint with the point of the knife, but do not take off the leg."

"Then lace down both sides of the breast bone and open the breast pin, but do not take it off. Then raise the Merry Thought between the breast bone and the top of it," and so on till the turkey is boned. While this is being done the "Christmas bowl" is passed.

After they are helped to turkey and pig they pass the vegetables and delicacies, and even the mince pie is eaten when they have the desire for it.

**The Correct Manners.** The proper conventions are strictly adhered to. The book of etiquette says: "A gentleman must not lean her elbows on the table, nor by a ravenous gesture discover a voracious appetite, nor talk with her mouth full, nor smack her lips like a pig."

The children were kept in order. In all the feast was decorous, but merry for all that.

At last, when they have eaten to the extent of their capacity, the plum pudding, blazing and with a piece of holly stuck in the top, is brought in and eaten with brandy sauce. Then the toasts are drunk with the good home-brewed wine, and the feast is done.

**HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS**

Christmas, originally Cristes masse ("the mass or church festival of Christ"), is the English name for the season in which the birth of Christ is commemorated. It is apparent, however, that a festival was celebrated at this season long before it was held sacred as the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth. The Saturnalia of the Romans and the winter festival of the heathen Britons were both celebrated about December 25; and later, the Roman festival in honor of the sun god, Mithra (instituted 273 A. D.). From the latter the day became to be known as the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun"; and after its adoption by the Christian church in the fourth century as the anniversary of Christ's birth, this name was given a symbolic interpretation.

A study of the customs associated with this period also reveals a heathen, if not invariably a solar, origin. The lighting of the Yule log (la buche de Noel) on Christmas eve, once a widespread European custom, is or was a function of such predominant importance among the Lithuanians and Letts that their words for Christmas eve literally signify "Log evening." The sports of the "Lords of Misrule" in England are thought to be an inheritance from the Saturnalia. The decoration of churches with the once sacred mistletoe and holly is a pagan survival.

**SUNDAY SCHOOL CHRISTMAS ENTERTAINMENT**

For many years one Sunday school has had a giving Christmas instead of a receiving one. The pupils bring gifts instead of receiving them.

The favorite method is for a class to plan a Christmas dinner. Each one in the class brings something for that purpose. One of the boys or girls can march forward dragging a turkey or a chicken, and other member or members of the same class following with articles for a Christmas dinner, not forgetting cranberries, mince pie and celery.

Still others like better to flourish a paper with

an order for a ton or half a ton of coal. This may be given by the united contributions of a class.

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